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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 000353

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [BD](#) [BGD](#)

SUBJECT: HARTAL KICKS OFF NEW OPPOSITION PROGRAM

REF: DHAKA 0239

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

1. (SBU) On January 22, the Awami League led a nationwide strike (hartal) called to protest the recent activities of the Election Commission (EC), including the recent appointment of two controversial Commissioners and the EC's apparent determination to continue creating a new voter role (reftel). In Dhaka, the hartal appeared to be somewhat better enforced and observed than during hartals over the last 12 months.

2. (U) Some 200 persons were arrested during clashes with police, according to press reports, while the most serious encounter with police occurred in Jamalpur, where police firing injured 10 demonstrators. There were no reports of deaths or life-threatening injuries anywhere during the hartal.

3. (C) On January 23, during a meeting with Peace Corps Chief of Security Pat Hogan (septel), Home Minister of State Babar told Charge that 64 demonstrators had been arrested, but 80 percent of them had already been released. While participating in a hartal is a democratic right, he said, curtailing the ability of citizens to move about, and of businesses and schools to open, is an infringement of non-participant's rights.

4 (C) Comment: The hartal kicked off the AL-led opposition's latest effort to force the government to hold early elections and accept far-reaching changes in the electoral setup. Rallies around the country and a long "road march" are next on the agenda. At the new session of parliament opening late January 23, the AL will continue its boycott. It is unclear if AL MP's will show up in the next several days to avoid forfeiting their seats for 90 days of non-attendance.
CHAMMAS